

Writing Effective Scholarship Applications

Karen Kueneman
Research Officer
Faculties of Information & Media Studies, Law and Music
Western University
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kueneman@uwo.ca

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Evaluation Criteria for Scholarships

- past academic results, as demonstrated by transcripts, awards and distinctions;
- the program of study (research plan) and its potential contribution to the advancement of knowledge;
- relevant *professional* and *academic* experience, including *research training*, as demonstrated by research assistantships, conference presentations and scholarly publications;
- written evaluations from referees

When writing your program of study you will...

- Outline your thesis proposal including the **research question, context (literature review), objectives, methodology, contribution to the advancement of knowledge, how you will mobilize the knowledge**
- Often the application will also ask you to provide the name of your supervisor – make sure you also add why you are working with that person

Scholarship Writing is NOT the same as Academic Writing

Academic Writing

Past oriented:

Work you have done

Expository:

Explaining to reader

Impersonal:

Objective, dispassionate

Verbosity rewarded:

Few length constraints

Specialized Terminology:

“Insider jargon”

Scholarship Writing

Future oriented:

Work you wish to do

Persuasive:

“Sell” the reader

Personal:

Convey Excitement

Brevity rewarded:

Strict length constraints

Accessible language:

Broad audience

How to start if you don't know where to start...

- What are you passionate about?
- What is the problem (and why is it important)?
- How is existing knowledge or practice inadequate?
- Why is your idea better?
- How is it new, unique, different?
- What will it contribute and who will benefit from it?

What is the problem (issue)?...

The problem is the most important element of your proposal.

- An **important need or issue** that should be addressed
- A **gap** between where we are now and where we could be
- A **limitation** of current knowledge or way of doing things

It's also an opportunity...

- A fresh idea can advance our understanding or address a societal need
- A new paradigm reshapes our thinking or way of doing things

What makes a proposal competitive?

- Significance (important area of research)
- Original approach
- Strong likelihood of success, i.e., will make a significant contribution to the field
- Knowledge and experience in the discipline
- Succinct, logical and focused project plan
- Realistic amount of work
- Sufficient detail

Consider the Reviewer...

- Most competitive programs utilize review panels
- The more competitive, the more reviewer(s) will look for reasons to reject proposals

Successful applications = Good Ideas without Mistakes

- good ideas are often weakened by mistakes made when preparing a proposal
- Next - common proposal mistakes and strategies to avoid them

Structure the Proposal

(Mistake: Poor organization)

Always follow the format provided by the sponsor! Where none is provided, build your case in distinct sections:

- I. Problem Statement; or Significance of the Research
- II. Project Purpose (Overall goal + Specific objectives)
Important: Cite “fit” with program objectives!
- I. Research Design; or Workplan (Activities + Timelines)
- II. Applicant Qualifications and Capabilities
- III. Evaluation Plan; or Expected Outcomes

[Appendix (supplementary materials) if allowed]

Prove the importance of your project (Mistake: Weak Argument)

- State your purpose and case for need up front; build a compelling argument
- Think “Sales” not academic journal
- Cite an authoritative source(s)

Start with the Pitch: Sell Your Idea!

I. Set the Stage – Lay Out the Problem (*“Who Cares?”*)

- A. Get the reviewer interested at the outset
- B. Identify the importance—stress the need
- C. Summarize the state of the art
- D. Describe technical challenges to solving the problem and potential benefits

II. State the theme – Your Solution

- E. Describe the concept and establish credibility
- F. Describe your project’s fundamental purpose

III. Create a Vision (*“So What?”*)

- G. Show how your work will advance the field
- H. Envision the world with the problem solved

This “pitch” should be the opening of the proposal’s very first section

Assume an uninformed but intelligent reader (Mistake: Using Jargon)

- Use clear, accessible language
- Stick with direct statements and active voice
- Avoid insider jargon and acronyms

Passive vs. Active Voice

- *It has been demonstrated by research that...*
- *The SAP program is being implemented by our department...*
- *Following administration of the third dosage, measurements will be taken...*
- *Research shows clearly that...*
- *Our department launched SAP this year...*
- *After dosage 3, we will measure...*

Formulate specific, measurable objectives

(Mistake: Vague goals & objectives)

Goal: General statement of the project's overall purpose(s)

*“Our aim with this innovative ... is to improve
....”*

Objective: A specific, measurable outcome or milestone

Illustrate the Project concept and the work plan

(Mistake: Unclear project description and work plan)

- If you can, use illustrations/charts...
 1. Visualize the overall project with a drawing
 2. Specify major tasks and timelines; use Gantt charts, calendars or flow charts
- If you can't use illustrations/charts, ensure that you describe the research methods clearly – WHO (& how many), WHAT (are you asking them to do), WHERE, WHEN, WHY
- Describe doctrinal legal research – traditional methodology – “interpretive legal method”

Follow application instructions exactly! (Mistake: Deviating from guidelines)

- Common problems:
 - Late submission
 - Narrative too long
 - Wrong Font (type, size)
 - Margins, spacing too small

Pay attention to all review criteria (Mistake: Ignoring review criteria)

- Read evaluation criteria carefully; then ensure you address them in the project description
- Touch all the bases – not just the ones you are comfortable with

Reviewers will use the criteria to “score” your proposal

Presubmission review

(Mistake: Writing solo)

- Ask your supervisor and colleagues for comments and suggestions – consider asking others not familiar with your research (roommate, mother, etc) to read it and provide suggestions (do they understand it?)
- At least one reviewer should be qualified to critique proposal content (supervisor/other)
- Check your ego at the door
- Allow time for rewrites!

Use proofreaders

(Mistake: Document errors)

- Find an eagle eye perfectionist
- Proofreaders read for form, not content
- Zero tolerance – no error is too small to correct
- Root out inconsistencies in format as well as typos, misspellings, grammar, etc.

Write, rewrite & rewrite (Mistake: Insufficient editing)

- Most winning proposals have been polished repeatedly
- Let it rest in between; sleep on every rewrite
- Fight the evil Pride of Authorship – be open to suggestions
- Must allow time!

Writing Tips - Summary

- **Avoid jargon** – must be accessible to fields other than the one you are in
- **Avoid acronyms**
- Write in the **present tense** and **active voice** if possible
- Be **clear and direct**
- Write a **concrete realizable plan** – convince the reviewers that **you are a good bet** to get the research done
- Don't be shy about your talents or accomplishments – **advocate for yourself and your research**
- Consider using **white space, headers** – make it **easy to read**

What I look for...

- a “catchy” beginning – what is the problem?
- Replace words that appear “tentative” with words that show “confidence”
- A solid final statement –how will your research contribute.
- Ease of Reading - Paragraph breaks and white space
- Make the reviewer want to read it...

Described Simply, the Program of Study...

- There's a problem in the world
- It is important and here's why
- Some research has been done
- But there are gaps
- My research will fill the gaps
- Here's how I will do the research/fill the gap
- Why am I the best person to do it

This Research Proposal Template has won hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant money for multiple graduate students and scholars in the social sciences and humanities over the past 15 years. Let's walk through this step by step. The first step is to identify what large general topic of wide interest that your specific project relates to. These are topics that anyone, including your grandmother or someone sitting next to you on a plane, would say, "oh, yes, that's an important topic." Obvious Examples include: immigration, sustainable energy, changes in the family, curing cancer, new social technologies, environmental degradation, global warming, etc. Until you can identify a really broadly interesting theme that your project relates to, you will never be successful in applying for grants. If you work on arcane topics or in a small field (ie, medieval French literature), don't despair. You don't have to relate to current events or go all presentist. You just need to find the way in to your topic that starts at its widest possible relevance or interest, as appropriate for your field. Don't start at your topical micro-niche, even when you know you're writing for others in or near that niche. You always must show a wider import/context to your topic. This is because your application must *excite* the readers, and the readers are likely from a range of different disciplines. They will not all be interested in your discipline's narrow debates. They want to know that your work and your intellectual and scholarly vision are wide, and broad, and encompassing. Once you have established your wide, much debated, topic, you then identify two bodies of literature relevant to your own training that dealt with this topic. If you are an anthropologist, and your research is on Haitian communities in New York City, for example, you will start by pointing to the wide debates on immigration in America. Then you will write, "scholars in many fields have addressed these important questions. Within cultural anthropology, scholars such as xxx, xxx, and xxx have all explored the role of cultural beliefs in shaping immigrant communities. Within Caribbean Studies, meanwhile, scholars such as xxx, xxx, and xxx have focused on the specific demographic and economic trends which have fueled outward migration."

Kelsky, K. (2011) Dr. Karen's Foolproof Grant Template. *The Professor Is In*. Accessed January 18, 2016 at: <http://theprofessorisin.com/2011/07/05/dr-karens-foolproof-grant-template/>.

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Research Questions: If you work on arcane topics or in a small field (ie, medieval French literature), don't despair. You don't have to relate to current events or go all presentist. You just need to find the way in to your topic that starts at its widest possible relevance or interest, as appropriate for your field. Don't start at your topical micro-niche, even when you know you're writing for others in or near that niche. You always must show a wider import/context to your topic.

Context: This is because your application *must excite the readers*, and the readers are likely from a range of different disciplines. They will not all be interested in your discipline's narrow debates. They want to know that your work and your intellectual and scholarly vision are wide, and broad, and encompassing.

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Other Parts of the Application

- Transcripts
- References – letters of appraisal
 - Provide your referee with:
 - Your CV
 - Your transcript
 - Draft of your research plan
 - Any other information that might help them write the letter
- Publications, presentations, etc
- Evidence of Leadership, Research Experience

Look at Successful Applications

- SGPS's [Scholarship Library](#)
- If you know someone who has written a successful application ask if they are willing to share their application with you

Most Importantly

- Follow the instructions or guidelines provided by OGS , CIHR, NSERC and SSHRC or any other granting agency to which you may be applying
- Use the correct font, margins, etc.
- Correct all grammatical and spelling errors
- Start early

Reference

Porter, Robert. (2007) Why Academics Have a Hard Time Writing Good Grant Proposals, *The Journal of Research Administration*, Vol 38 (2), 37-43.